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SUBJECT: NEW IIP LEADERSHIP TAKES PARTY IN NEW DIRECTION

REF: BAGHDAD 1396

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The largest Sunni Arab political party, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), has changed its leadership in a move that might presage a reconciliation with the Prime Minister's Shia Islamist party. On May 24, 2009, the IIP selected both a new Political Bureau, and Osama al-Tikriti as its new Secretary-General (SG) during its regular four-year election. Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi stepped down as SG, claiming the need to focus on his current job. Council of Representatives (CoR) Speaker Ayad al-Samarraie retained his post as Deputy Secretary-General (DSG). IIP insiders report that Hashimi was forced out because of his difficult relations both within the party and with other political groups, and especially because Hashimi's relationship with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had become too personal and antagonistic. Tikriti reportedly was elected because he and his followers were viewed as more open to compromise. In fact, Tikriti hosted a well-received meeting between IIP and Da'wa leaders in the CoR three days after becoming SG. Tikriti told Poloff that he planned to work cooperatively with other groups in the CoR, in an effort to repair Sunni political divisions, and strengthen the Sunni vote. Two initial challenges that Tikriti will confront as the new IIP SG are the accusations by the alleged Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (currently in GOI detention) of IIP contacts with Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and GOI threats to lift the parliamentary immunity of some Tawafuq members. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The full slate of the new Political Bureau is as follows: SG Osama al-Tikriti, DSG Ayad al-Samarraie, Chief of Staff Nasir al-Ani, and Members Selim al-Jeboori, Hamdi Hassoun (who has an outstanding arrest warrant from a Diyala arrest operation in March), Mohamed Iqbal (from Mosul), Abdal Karim Izzat (a Kurd from Kirkuk), Amar Wajeh, and Baha Naqshabandi. There is one other member, as yet unidentified.

Why Change and Why Now?

¶3. (C) In a meeting with Poloff, Tikriti said that Hashimi willingly conceded his post because he needed to commit all his time to the vice presidency. Tikriti also said that most of the Political Bureau members were changed. According to Saifaldin Abdul Rahman, Hashimi's senior advisor and a close Embassy contact (strictly protect), all of the members of the Political Bureau were changed with the exception of Ayad al-Samarraie, who, unlike Hashimi, apparently can handle two positions at once in an election year: i.e. Speaker of the CoR and DSG of the IIP's Political Bureau.

¶4. (C) Abdul Rahman, however, told Poloff that Hashimi has a reputation for being a difficult person to work with, both within the party and among coalition partners. He said that some IIP members blamed Hashimi for the breakdown in relations between the IIP and the Sons of Iraq. Many of these members also blamed Hashimi, in part due to his increasingly personal and antagonistic relationship with the

Prime Minister, for the deterioration of relations with the government. President Jalal Talabani also told Emboffs that he believes that VP Tariq al-Hashimi's removal was about dealing with Maliki; Hashimi's complaints against Maliki had become personal. Finally, fellow party members also felt that Hashimi was not bringing along the mid-level managers within the party and developing a stronger base, according to Abdul Rahman.

Alliances and National Elections

15. (C) Tikriti said that he was beginning to review strategies for the upcoming national elections, and it seems that even the IIP is going the "national secular" route. Without ever using the words "non-sectarian" or "secular" - and Tikriti speaks very good English - he stated that the IIP must abandon the old practices and appeal to a wider cross-section of the Iraqi population. Tikriti also said, without specifically referring to the Kurds, that other Sunni parties had flourished in the provincial elections, while the IIP had suffered as a result of "some perceived associations." When pressed, however, Tikriti said that relations were still good with the Kurds and ISCI.

16. (C) Tikriti and Jeboori both told Poloff that the party was reviewing its alliances and was looking for coalitions with groups that shared the IIP's interests in a "national project". Both said the IIP must find ways to repair the Sunni divides; Tikriti noted that he was reaching out to Saleh al-Mutlak of the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue and other Sunni groups, saying it was important to bring the

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Sunnis back together.

Da'wa - IIP Rapprochement?

17. (C) Somewhat surprising was Tikriti's statement that both he and Samarraie thought it was important to reach out to Da'wa and rebuild the relationship for the sake of Iraq. Tikriti told Poloff that he and the Speaker wanted to cooperate with the government on national issues and move away from sectarianism. Abdul Rahman also said that many in the IIP were unhappy with the IIP's antagonistic relationship with Maliki and the Da'wa party, and these party members wanted to repair relations. Two days following Tikriti's meeting with Poloff, IIP CoR leaders hosted Da'wa CoR leaders in Tawafuq's offices. Representatives of each group publicly stated that it was a good meeting and that there were grounds for cooperation. A Tawafuq staff member said the meeting "was the good work of Ayad al-Samarraie." A Da'wa staff member told Poloff that the meeting had gone well and opined that the new IIP Political Bureau was much better than the previous and more pleasant to work with. One CoR staff member said that many members of Da'wa and the IIP had been friendly while in exile together in London, suggesting a return to friendlier days.

Political Challenges Ahead

18. (C) Because Samarraie has not stepped down as the number two of the IIP, the greatest political challenge may be efforts by political opponents to conflate party policy with parliamentary activity. The most obvious example is the anti-corruption agenda currently underway in the CoR. While many observers have approved of Samarraie's handling of the situation, Maliki remains suspicious of the process. Several GOI interlocutors, including Maliki's inner circle, believe that certain ministers have been identified for parliamentary interrogation because they are allies of Maliki. On the other side, some MPs have claimed to us and to the media that the GOI request to remove parliamentary immunity from some

members - mostly IIP/Tawafuq - is retaliation for the interrogations (reftel).

¶9. (C) How to respond adroitly to accusations from alleged AQI detainee Abu Omar al-Baghdadi also may be a challenge for the IIP. Some newspaper accounts suggest that Hashimi's removal was a response to the detainee's claim that the IIP and AQI are linked. Although it is unlikely that the detained person is Baghdadi, the rumors have nonetheless created problems for the IIP. Some newspaper reports have identified Baghdadi as a primary cause in the change of the IIP leadership. Moreover, several of the arrests resulting from Baghdadi's alleged confessions were provincial IIP leaders. Other IIP leaders have GOI arrest warrants against them, including Hamdi Hassoun, the Diyala party leader who was elected to the Political Bureau. It is unclear if Hassoun's warrant is a result of the Baghdadi confession.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Most interlocutors view the new Political Bureau positively. Tikriti's platform to rebuild political relationships that have suffered in the past four years is clearly an election-year adjustment that reflects a weaker-than-expected performance in the provincial elections. And, while the possibility of a Da'wa - IIP rapprochement is both startling and interesting, continued mistrust and tense relations between Maliki and Samarraie make real progress less likely. A repaired relationship would most likely quash talk of a no-confidence vote, and could promote GOI/CoR cooperation on several key issues, including Kirkuk, anti-corruption, the referendum, the budget and Qanti-corruption, the referendum, the budget and reconciliation. Repairing the Sunni divisions that resulted from 2005 elections and the speaker's race may ultimately be more useful to the IIP in the short and medium term since this would unify the Sunni bloc in the CoR and better position Sunnis for elections and government formation following national elections.

¶11. (C) Of greater concern is the IIP leadership's stated recognition that their Kurdish alliances hurt them in the provincial elections. Jeboori noted that the perceived closeness of the IIP to the Kurds hurt the IIP in provincial elections - especially in Ninewa where Hadba won on a strong national secular and anti-Kurd message. Relations between the IIP and the Kurdish alliance are currently amiable and the Kurds have allied themselves with the IIP on several issues, including the election of Speaker Samarraie. Jeboori did not suggest that the IIP would switch to an anti-Kurd message, but his comment clearly indicates the IIP is carefully evaluating its alliances with the Kurds.

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